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Transient Dwelling: Trains as places of identification for the floating population of China

Jie Zhang

Research Institute of Foreign Literature, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China;

Department of Geography, Durham University, Durham, UK

Mike Crang

Department of Geography, Durham University, Durham

ABSTRACT: China has experienced massive rural-urban migration, producing a huge so-called ‘floating population’ (*liudong renkou*). This paper attends to what it means to be thus between places by focusing on the embodied and emotional experience of migrant travel. Each year sees the Spring Festival Rush (*Chun Yun*) with the largest annual movement of people as millions of these rural migrant laborers (*nongmingong*) return to their homes for the holidays. The Spring Festival Rush is marked by huge crowds queuing overnight for train tickets, with throngs of migrants carrying woven bags of belongings and gifts on their shoulders, who end up standing in the overcrowded ‘hard seat’ carriages of trains. By closely reading some of the poems from the emerging genre of ‘Hired laborers literature’, this article explores migrants’ affective and emotional journeys. It argues this transit experience is one of the key shared sites of common identification for a

migrant population whose mode of inhabitation is through circulation and mobility. That mobility creates shared experiences characterized by specific corporealities, material cultures and senses of social stratification.

KEY WORDS: rural migrants; social stratification; dwelling; trains; festivals;

China

Introduction

Contemporary China has witnessed enormous rural to urban migration driven by its transition to a market-oriented economy (Liang, 2001; Fan 2008a). Since the 1980s, huge industrial and commercial development has occurred, especially concentrated in China's special economic zones such as Shenzhen and in the coastal cities of Guangzhou creating an acute labor shortage in those industrializing regions. As a result, a large number of rural dwellers from poor provinces like Sichuan, Jiangxi, Hunan, Guangxi, Guizhou have moved to these developed areas. These rural migrant workers (*nongmingong*) came to form a so-called 'floating population' (*liudong renkou*) that is now estimated at up to 210 million by the National Population and Family Planning Commission, and that dwarfs the officially resident urban labor force in those industrializing areas (Lu, 2004). If the fact of the migration is well known then the experiences of mobility that characterize this floating population are less often discussed. In this paper we begin by exploring some of the main issues studies have highlighted for the rural migrants, before then suggesting current studies have focused on seeing such migrants as in place, as they make their lives in the city, or through persisting ties to their natal areas, rather than unpacking the processes of transit that link rural and urban settings. Migrant lives are seen as either here or there, and the route between is taken for granted, with migration studies 'slow to acknowledge the significance of the physical time—spaces of migration journeys' which is surprising given how flows of people are stratified

by means of travel and that in migrants' narratives 'travel itself is an extremely important part of this migration experience' (Burrell 2011, 1023, 1025).

This paper focuses upon the way travel back to natal districts for the Spring Festival, around the lunar New Year, has become part of the rhythm of life for these migrants and the process of travel one of their shared *topoi* of emotional belonging and alienation. To do this we look at the material culture of long distance train travel and its spawning of a new genre of expressive poetry, as a way of vocalizing the privations of the migrants. The rise of new literary genres connected to travel has often marked the irruption of new moments and forms of mobility when they pose challenges to social norms and practices (Fujii 1999; Freedman 2002). In them the anxieties of social transformation find expression. Drawing upon these sources also means we are able to draw together the experience of movement physically binding the nation, and its dissemination and reception in cultural forms that give it shared meaning just as previous nations and eras had their own literary forms linked to their experience of mobility and their railways (Cresswell 2010, 19; Verstraete 2002, 146). The paper suggests that the flows of China's rural migrants enact not smooth spaces of flows but striated spaces and discriminatory technologies of mobility. The experience of travel itself is part of the migrants' lifeworlds and a modality through which they experience oppression. Most writing on leisure travel, holidaymaking and festivals speak to a sociality around enjoyment. In this case holiday travel is a glue that binds not through festive communitas and

joy but shared misery.

Being out of place: the creation of a floating population.

Despite their numbers, rural migrants are systemically disadvantaged by China's still persisting *hukou* system of household residency registration. The system has been the subject of detailed scrutiny and analysis that is beyond the scope of this paper (see Fan 2008a, 40-53). The effects though are widely agreed. Citizens to whom the state grants a right of abode and settled urban status, enjoy various privileges whilst the so called 'rural migrant laborers' (*nongmingong*) without urban *hukou* are still considered 'outsiders', and temporary migrants even if they have been living and working in the city for many years (Solinger, 1999; Sun and Fan 2011). This system has led to a two-class urban society and an 'enduring spatial politics' of city versus putatively country dweller (Zhang 2002, 313). 'Without a local *hukou*, they are excluded from the more prestigious and desirable jobs -- jobs that are reserved for the urban permanent residents' (Fan, 2002, 107) and most are relegated to the bottom rungs of the labor market (sometimes labeled the 3D category of the dangerous, dirty and demeaning, and often physically demanding (Chan 2010, 664)) in the manufacturing and construction sectors that urbanites are not willing to accept. The state has used the system of residential permits to channel rural migrants into export-led manufacturing and produce the labor prepared to work for the low wages that make those factories globally

competitive (Chan 2010; Fan 2004). Though there have been reforms, these have been left to local implementation, and broadly speaking the least change, and sometimes actual hardening of rules, has occurred in the largest cities (Fan 2008b).

Labor market segmentation compounds discrimination in other social areas. Younger female migrants, excluded from state housing through lack of *hukou* and market housing by low income, may well be housed in factory dormitories, that resemble not so much fixed settlements as camps, characterized by crowdedness, dirtiness and crudeness of fixtures (Wang, 2006, 114; Zhu, 2007, 72). Other migrants move into the 'villages in cities' (*chengzhongcun*) that have emerged as big cities, swallow peripheral rural settlements. These settlements are officially classified as non-urban areas and can be developed without the costs, or benefits, of infrastructure and services, or the blessing of the planning authorities. There are an estimated 867 of these urban villages in, for example, the Beijing Municipal Area which account for 49.5 percent of the total residential land (Zheng et al 2009, 428). These tend to be self-organized developments, built by migrants themselves mobilising natal place ties (*laoxiang* or *tongxiang*) (Ma & Xiang, 1998). Such enclaves, though numerous, have remained marginalized and characterized by poor living conditions in the face of central state control over housing. As 'nonstate socioeconomic spaces', they are not recognized by the city government as a legitimate communities but, rather, perceived 'as a source of danger and disorder' (Zhang, 2001, 196;

2002, 319). These enclaves where migrants outnumber locals by up to a factor of 8, also disproportionately house the migrants who have children (Fan et al 2011, 2171). Lack of official status means those that have children must either leave them with relatives in rural 'home' districts or send them to unofficial schools in the city (Zhang 2002, 318), where they too soon pick up on their marginality, expressed in the lack of the usual uniforms, and the humiliations they encounter in daily life being treated as people of low personal quality (*suzhi*) (Woronov 2004).

There is then a burgeoning academic literature that has drawn attention to Chinese internal migrants' employment patterns, their living and working conditions (Shen and Huang 2003), and their undoubted marginalization from social welfare. The popular vocabulary used to describe migrants foregrounds their capacity as workers (*dagong*) or their lack of belonging in a host community as a 'floating population' (*liudong renkou*). The latter term is 'representative of urban attitudes towards the rural laborers in their midst. Although the word [floating] sounds relatively innocuous in English, in Chinese 'liudong' connotes a lack of stability, a potentially dangerous detachment from the moral order that in China has always been associated with strong connections to localities' (Woronov 2002, 293; Fan 2002). The privileging of long term residence in one place and the 'associations of mobility with deviance, shiftlessness and disrepute' (Cresswell 2003, 14) are not, of course confined to China but widely associated with a sedentarist metaphysics that

sees fixed dwelling in one place as authentic dwelling. The continued appellation 'rural migrant laborers' who make up a 'floating population' shows migrants caught in limbo with ever decreasing connections to farming but denied full rights to the city. Migrants' social status is neither urbanite, due to rural registered residences denying them the benefits of full urban citizenship, nor peasant since they spend more time living in cities. The focus of this paper is both that limbo but also how that experience that has become popularly acknowledged.

Fan et al. (2011) suggest the persistence of migrant as a category, with neither permanent settlement nor return in sight troubles many migration models. They suggest we think of these Chinese migrants having a strong pattern of bilocality with split households and families. Lawson (2000, 174) characterizes this situation as inbetweenness. Fan et al. (2011) however deploy a term that moves us from the two fixed points at either end of the migration by suggesting we think of these migrants as 'circulators'. That felicitous term reminds us that although there has been widespread recognition that 'a large floating population is moving around in China' (Shen & Huang 2003, 51), little attention has been paid to the actual process of moving. Migrant experience is united not only around daily urban struggles but also the travel that connect lifeworlds stretched between city and country; and the vehicle for those travels is slow, cheap trains.

It is a lifeworld that is stretched since, in a debilitating cycle, a lack of

permanent residence rights for rural migrants leads to disadvantage and segmentation in education, housing and social insurance which in turn greatly hampers them from settling down in cities and establishing family units. Given such a situation those wishing to develop families find lacking an urban *hukou* disadvantages them in the urban marriage market and many return to their natal districts to marry (Fan 2004, 290). If they have children their unofficial status makes schooling them difficult in the cities (Woronov 2004). Thus family members continue being separated and that drives a seasonal holiday migration to revisit kith and kin in their 'home' areas. Burrell has argued that such a to and fro has created a sense of hypermobility for Polish migrants in the UK (Burrell 2011). However, in China we suggest that a sense of being adrift (*liudong*) has a more pejorative connotation. The process of travelling, of being between places, is as existentially defining as either end point for these so-called 'migrant peasant workers' who are no longer peasants but not accorded the rights of urban dwellers. The result is a dwelling in transit.

The term dwelling has been freighted with connotations of 'snug, well-wrapped localism' (Ingold, 2008, 1808). The aim in this paper is to destabilise those links by seeing dwelling as what Ingold calls habitation. It sees lifeworlds as 'bundles of interwoven lines of growth and movement, together constituting a meshwork in fluid space. The environment, then, comprises not the surroundings ... but a zone of entanglement' (Ingold, 2008, 1796) binding people and material objects. This is to see dwelling as not just

about sedentary practices, but about shaping fluid spaces where lines do not encircle bounded places but constitute relations not between one given place and another, but making 'a trail of movement or growth ... along which life is lived' (Ingold, 2008, 1805). It is to see relations between places and practices of movement as central to existence because 'Lives are not led inside places but through around, to and from them' (Ingold 2009, 33). Travel is not the antithesis of dwelling but rather there must be 'a variety of ways of dwelling, but that once we move beyond that of land, almost all involve complex relationships between belongingness and travelling, within and beyond the boundaries of national societies. People can indeed be said to dwell in various mobilities' (Urry 2000: cited in Obrador 2003, 51).

In this article we will focus on interprovincial migrants, who at present number over 120 million and who are more likely to be from less advantaged and rural backgrounds, unable to gain permanent residence status (Fan 2002, 117). Given their position in the labor market most of these rural migrant laborers can only return for family reunions during Spring Festival and must return to the cities after a short period (Fan et al 2011, 2166). It is these who must queue for long train rides back to where they 'belong.' Western media such as CNN and the BBC run occasional reports on what results, the 'China new-year exodus or Spring Break rush' (*Chun Yun*), which gets described with a mixture of exoticised fascination and horror and the world development report calls the 'largest movement of people in the world' (Chan 2010, 659).

Amid this enormous flow of humanity, this paper asks how those transit spaces are inhabited, that is in the full sense of both occupied but also lived in, how they come to form a shared experience characterized by specific corporealities, material cultures and senses of social stratification.

Mobile spaces as places of contact and differentiation

The mobilities turn has pointed to a world in motion, and made through motion, where movement is the norm not just an exception. The migrant as a figure has become one of the tropes of this mobile world, and, in this case of, a modern China fully partaking in world of flows. The migrant is the symbol of modernity as both progress and instability (Zhang 2002). However, we want to suggest that often work on migrants in China has not connected with work on the experience of travel. For the floating population of China, seasonal movements characterize part of their identity, and indeed they are characterized by such repeated movement.

Studies of migrants both in China (as elsewhere) have tended to downplay the actual movement of people and the role of this experience in favour of a focus on the fixed points at either end of migration. There have been some pioneering studies that inspire us to think there is room here to unpack the production of the migrant in and through travel. Jacquemet (1999) for instance followed Moroccan migrants taking one of the 2-4 coaches each week that make the three day two night trip to Milan, with 48 migrants sleeping uneasily

on their reclining seats. They travel from desiccated formerly sheep farming phosphate plains and look to return in (and sell on) second hand cars whose Italian number plates decorate their homes as symbols of cosmopolitan experience. Burrell (2008) highlights four socio-technical formations, including passports, car and coach journeys, suitcases, and laptops in airport lounges that form shared experiences for Polish migrants' as they cross the EU, and the shared journeys themselves become one of the moments of collectively being Polish migrants together (2011, 1027). There are equally a few studies of objects and practices enabling and impeding mobility – such as the visa application process (Jensen 2009), the checkpoint (Tawil-Souri 2009) or as preserved places symbolising a transcended migrant past (Maddern 2008). Despite calls for work on migration to look at migrant stories as evidence of cultural contexts and socially constructed forms of experience (Lawson 2000, 185) and work with migrant narratives that reveals the pain of separation (Lee & Pratt 2011), the practices of movement and transit places remain overlooked (Burrell 2011). Indeed, Fan's (2004) work, drawing upon qualitative information from Chinese migrants, used the return to villages in the Spring Festival as a recruitment opportunity – not as an object of inquiry itself.

By contrast work on mobilities has attended to places of transit and their role in producing differentiated and unequal patterns of mobility (Crang 2002). This work has tended to two scales each with different emphases. The first looks at the quotidian movement in place as an arena of social contact (and

segregation), the second speaks to more episodic travel over long distances. First, then, the everyday is seen as a realm where being on the move is one of the defining characteristics of urban experience. This work has addressed how sites of mobility, marked as they are by structures of power often encoded in the rationalities of transport planning (Flyvbjerg 1998), come to be major loci of urban experience and social contact – or the lack thereof. These interstitial sites, so often overlooked in accounts founded on places of residence, can be seen to have a role in their own right as points of contact and separation with their own rituals, habits and practices where people dwell together in motion.

The humble bus, for instance, thus becomes a place of encounter, where bodies are thrown together in close proximity and it enacts assumptions of social difference and conduct. The bus is one of ‘the most indelible sites of public connection and encounter, for the bus itself is a space within which cohesive relations and temporary communities variously develop and disintegrate’ (Wilson 2011, 646). In cities such as Los Angeles, the inequalities enacted in waiting, walking and riding mean the bus becomes a major constitutive site of black feminine identity (Hutchinson 2000, 115). This identity is enacted through a specific embodied experience of the city that is so different to the fetishised, automobile based experience of Los Angeles. In very different circumstances, Chatterjee (2002) locates the erratic and capricious rhythms of Delhi bus services as one of the organising facets of life for lower middle and working classes in the city, whilst the factory owned buses

(*Bas kilang*) taking female workers to export processing jobs at night are a common feature of migrant's lives in Malaysia. More historically, the rise of commuter trains in Tokyo, led to new ways of seeing (and fantasizing) for male commuters that found expression in new genres of writing about, and reading whilst, commuting (Freedman 2002; Fujii 1999). Meanwhile on contemporary Australian urban commuter trains, Symes (2007) suggests that students form exclusive 'closed micro-communities' on their journeys. Public transport can be a site of mingling, being together and face-to-face contact, but also of identity differentiation, segregation and the assertion of social hierarchies (Letherby & Reynolds 2005, 184). These studies of transit spaces as sites of segregation and contact set themselves to find meaning in the mundane and distinguish that from the deliberate significance invested in grand voyages and travels.

A second strand of work addresses long distance movement, and the most prominent site discussed has arguably been the airport (see Gottdiener 2001; Rosler 1998; Pascoe 2001). The governance of traveling subjects through airports and their social stratification has been examined through technologies that speed and impede different forms of traveler (Dodge and Kitchin 2004). Budd (2011) has recently attended to the individual affective and aesthetic experiences of being aeromobile using first-hand records of passengers' experiences and the effects on their felt geographies of distance and proximity. The experience of air travel is often used as emblematic of a faster, more mobile world and its orderings.

Such work risks implying, unintentionally or deliberately, that other modes of long distance travel are outmoded and less important both empirically and conceptually. There has, however, been a body of work that has returned to the train as a mode of long distance transport. In part this has been in sympathy with political and cultural projects that have invested in (high speed) rail lines as symbols of a green modernity, and those where trains still function to bind political spaces together (Verstraete 2002) – as with European high speed networks as a vehicle for the project of European unification or the recent construction of the world's highest rail link connecting Beijing to Lhasa in Tibet.

Recent accounts have moved beyond the symbolic resonance of train networks to unpack the practices of passengering. Building from Schivelbusch's (1986) classic account of trains flattening of time and space as an element of modernity, work has revisited the experience of travel. Trains emerged as places to watch and be watched, which altered the way people viewed the landscape and each other (Freedman 2002): a place then of both *flânerie* and facework. Alternately work has looked at the transient practices of dwelling in and inhabiting trains, such as the unpacking of belongings and colonizing of a space for the self (Letherby & Reynolds 2005, 165), and the way the passenger is spatially configured and the time of the trip is punctuated by stops, the comings and goings of others that together create a rhythm of the journey (Watts 2008). More pointedly, we might add the misconfiguration of

our selves and our belongings, where suitcases are too heavy, stations too crowded and time too short as we struggle to catch a train. Then the journey produces not a disembodied gaze hurtling across the landscape but rather a cramped and tired body (Bissell 2008, 2009).

Whether it be bus, plane or train, they all produce shared emotional experiences that clearly cut across individuals – with different carriages on the same train developing different ambiances, and shared emotions such as frustration and/or humour rippling noticeably, if unevenly, across passengers (Bissell 2010, Letherby & Reynolds 2009, Wilson 2011). However, these contemporary western accounts perhaps underplay how differentiated and hierarchical mobility has always been, reinforced as it always has been in terms of different price, and by the railway carriages' decoration and comfort. This has been explicitly the case in China since the first Woosung Railway line in 1876 (Wang, 2006, 56), and currently it is at the Spring Break rush that this hierarchical experience is most pronounced.

For most of the interprovincial rural migrants among the floating population, making the long journey 'home', train travel has always been the first choice among different traffic modes due to its price and security compared with airplanes and long-distance coaches. These migrants comprise the largest group of passengers during Spring Festival peak. Since the 1990s, at each Spring Festival, various media outlets (mainstream newspapers, TV stations and emerging websites like Sina, Sohu, Tencent) have run special features

about rural migrant workers and long distance trains, which have highlighted the conflict between transportation capacity and the volume of people wishing to move (Bakken, 1998, 10). Spring Festival travel, which to a large degree has come to mean railway travel, thus becomes an issue of concern to and symbol of current society for ordinary Chinese people.

Bringing together migration and mobilities literatures, this article concentrates on how the corporeal experiences of rural migrants during Spring Festival Peak, from queuing overnight for tickets, to the luggage with which they are encumbered, through to struggling to find standing space and standing overnight in overcrowded carriages, typify a condition of dwelling in transit. These collective experiences are constitutive of migrants' subjectivity and social identity, as much as queues for cheap flights characterize the experiences of migrants from the new Europe to the West (Burrell 2011). Returning home during the Spring Festival is neither boring commuting, nor repetitive practice in everyday life, and definitely not an exciting experience of time-space compression. It is an uncomfortable journey involving a long time waiting to access overloaded carriages, that upon boarding are filled with squashed bodies, and it results in extreme fatigue. All of these are common experiences for the floating population, who are segregated from affluent passengers on 'soft seat', and sleeper carriages. The very terminology of Chinese rail travel expresses the embodied experience of inequality in movement.

This article focuses on the experiences in overcrowded hard seat carriages to speak to the nature of the floating population's existence. They live in overcrowded quarters in cities, queue in overcrowded ticket halls for the cheapest tickets, and rush to overcrowded 'hard seat' carriages. Their work, accommodation and transportation all entail such enclosed and crowded spaces. The felt experience of the floating population is explored through poems which visualize their painful experiences and feelings at every stage of their travels. These poems belong to what is known as the genre of "Hired laborer's literature", which is mainly composed by rural migrants and expresses their discontents. Emerging in the late 1980s in Shenzhen and then in Guangzhou, it received a large boost through publication in the famous magazine *Da Peng Wan*. At first 'Hired laborers literature' meant writings composed by rural laborers themselves and mainly sold to other rural migrants. Gradually the term has been extended to all literary works that reflect the material and spiritual life of laborers by both amateur and professional writers, becoming a recognized literary phenomenon.

Hard seats, slow trains and ticket queues: Hierarchy and social differentiation in rail travel

Besides labor market segmentation and restricted access to social welfare, there is a hierarchical and stratified correspondence between social classes and train types that separates the floating population in terms of speed,

comfort, space and fares. Popular categories materialise class through a language of corporeal comfort and speed (cf. Löfgren 2008, 345). Business people can afford so-called 'soft sleeper' berths on bullet and express trains, with two or four sharing a lockable compartment, even with TV in luxury classes; middling sorts travel on 'hard' sleepers, that is bunks in open plan carriages, on special express trains or the second class seats on bullet trains; all are set above 'hard seats' on slow trains that are the lot of most rural migrant laborers and students. For instance, the 1463 mile Beijing to Shanghai route, which follows one of the major flows of migrants identified in the 2000 Census (Zheng et al 2009, 432), takes just under 5 hours on the bullet (category G) train introduced in July 2011 costing ¥1870 (\$297) for a soft seat return, and then 13 hours on the 'fast' (category D or Z) service, with a 'soft sleeper' costing ¥499 (\$79), and a 'hard sleeper' from ¥306 (\$49) up to ¥327 (\$52) (for the lower bunk). The slow service on that route takes more than 22 hours with a hard seat costing ¥158 (\$25). On the 2153 mile Shanghai to Chendgu (Sichuan) route, the largest source region from Western China (Shen & Huang 2003, 55), the distance can be covered in 15 hours in a luxury soft sleeper for ¥2075 (\$329), on a train with no hard seats. The slow train takes 38 hours with hard seats costing ¥281 (\$45).

Even gaining access to the cheap trains is problematic for migrant workers. Presently there are two main ways of booking tickets on China railways -- advance telephone booking with an identity card number and buying tickets in

person.ⁱ Telephone booking has problems due to suspicions about fraudulent identity cards. So buying tickets in the station ticket hall or ticket agencies is still the most prevalent and reliable way. The cheap 'hard seat' tickets have a limited allocation at each station, and so to ensure they get them rural migrant workers have to queue at railway stations overnight before the tickets are officially on sale (usually 5 days before the date of travel). Given the numbers wishing to travel a much talked about frustration is to find all the tickets sold before reaching the front of the queue (Ji, 2004, 35). The following two poems, set respectively in Guangzhou, the most developed coastal city with the largest number of interprovincial rural migrants, and Shenzhen, the earliest special economic zone, describe vividly the difficulties rural laborers face in buying train tickets and illustrate the widespread complaints about problems even purchasing tickets to travel.

The first poem, *Longing for such a ticket*ⁱⁱ, is from a collection of poems about the experience of migrant youths.

Longing for such a ticket

Longing for such a ticket

It's departure time

Not too early, because I cannot ask for leave

Not too late, because my vacation is so short

Best if it's the second day after my factory holiday starts

If too hasty I will forget myself

Departure station is Guangzhou

Destination is my hometown

I work every daytime and overtime every night

I have never been to other places except my factory

Do not change my address, or I will lose my way

No matter whether I have a seat or not

I have been used to standing the whole day in factory

Not afraid of standing again, as long as I can get back to my hometown

Such a narrow ticket

Bearing my mother's hope for three years

Indicating my longing for hometown for three years

Such a narrow ticket

Every year I expect it, year after year

On that side, mother's hair turns grey,

On this side, my youth has worn out.

(author: Jia He, <http://bbs.jc001.cn/thread-93409-1-1.html>)

The ticket here becomes a repository for hope and a release of frustrations. It symbolises an end of one year's hardship, a new beginning, a chance to change life, a path to warmth and quietness. So it encodes contradictory feelings of hope/despair, happiness/agony, and a sense of dignity/frustration. It

despondently expresses the difficulty in buying a ticket that fits the break and work times. This young man travels to his home town from a city in which he resides but with which he remains unfamiliar because long working days prevent him exploring it. He has migrated to Guangzhou but is alien to this city, still inbetween. And yet home is a phantasm since the difficulty of finding time to queue, then affording and then obtaining a ticket for the right days – even without a seat, as we shall see later – has meant he has not physically travelled back ‘home’ for three years. The physical pain of the long journey fades against the emotional pain of separation.

For him, standing inside a train carriage is no different from standing inside his factory. “Standing” is his constant posture, and also the sign of his social status of having no settled position. He appears in the city in this posture and has to keep this posture on the train which connects his factory and hometown. The train here is part of an extended ‘discipline’ from the factory (Fujii, 1999, 118). Fear, powerlessness, bitterness and yearning; these feelings are woven together and compressed into ‘such a narrow ticket,’ for which his precious youth has been consumed – truly the queue is then but part of a system stealing time from the migrants (Vanini 2011).

These queues express the differentiated access to and desire for mobility. The second poem *A girl who queued for train tickets was trampled to death*, anthologized in *Selected poems of China’s rural migrant literature of 2008* (Xu, Luo & Chen, 2008, 272), was derived from a real-life tragedy at Shenzhen

railway station in 2003. A young woman was trampled to death by other people queuing for train tickets, but these same people were then reluctant to even make way for the ambulance for fear their place would be lost if they stepped out of line.

A girl who queued for train tickets was trampled to death

She only wished to go back home for Spring Festival

People were even reluctant to make way for the ambulance

Because they cared about their turn

The girl was like a sparrow

She bowed her innocent head

People were crowded around her

Sun light shone on her wan face through the tangle of limbs

Inside the sparrow's palm there was some money

She would not be troubled by returning home or living in this world

At this time, my pregnant wife was on an airplane

To our Northeast hometown, for the Spring Holiday

She overlooked our grand land

Dreaming about our better future

I sadly think about my unborn baby

In the future will it also experience such loneliness and crowdedness?

Will it also weep helplessly in the flow of queuing crowds?

Will a ray of sunlight be penetrated into its deserted and dry heart?

In seemingly interminable queues, characterized by a mixture of boredom, anxiety and confusion, people feel their status as floating or of drifting out of place, and lose moral anchors to feel helpless for themselves and others' requests. Here waiting is indeed an affective corporeal state that both expresses the relational privileges of mobility and creates its own active atmosphere. The waiting to buy a ticket circulates affects among the mass of bodies held in a suspension of not knowing whether they will travel or not, as hopes rise and ebb (Bissell 2007, 290).

Here mobility comes at the cost of a young life and the erosion of human empathy. With deliberate irony the poem turns to the wife of the poet who was taking a plane to their hometown, to stage differential mobility, and her privileged vision of the land from above, a vision denied in the midst of the queues, where in contrast the wan sunlight flickers on the dead girl's upturned face. This brutal story qualifies the extent that rural migrant workers 'have the right to travel', and shows the limits to what 'ought to be an essential part of one's life and is a fundamental human right' to mobility (Urry, 2002, 257). Such mobility here evidently exists but it is also 'a highly differentiated activity where many different people move in many different ways' which express and create social differentiation (Adey, 2006, 83). The train ticket is narrow in its form but it

contains so many complicated feelings that it has been one of the symbolically heaviest and the most controversial objects produced by the Spring Festival Rush. The other heavy object that has come to characterize the material culture of the returning migrant is the cheap woven bag serving as luggage.

Woven bags: Encumbered journeys and travelling companions

Rural migrants usually pack everything useful into a plastic woven carrier bag, known as 'snakeskin bags' (Figure 1). Typically, red and blue on a white background, they are big, cheap, durable and plastic, quite unlike the luggage of regular travelers who pull a wheeled suitcase. When these laborers leave home, the woven bag is filled with articles for everyday use, including clothes, quilts, sometimes homemade food. When returning home, it may bring back worn clothes, gifts or articles which are rare in the countryside alongside things needed for the journey.

Take a woven bag whose owner is from Henan Province for example, on his way to the city:

there are 40 articles altogether, including one pair of worn plastic slippers, one worn quilt and mattress, one black rucksack, four coating buckets, one rubber and one cotton gloves, two used thermos bottles, one enamel bowl and tea mug, one stainless steel spoon, one water glass, two apples, seven tea eggs, twelve bags of salt, some medicine about damp-removing-pain-killing ointment, one screw lampholder,

one stick used to tote this woven bag.

(http://news.ifeng.com/opinion/gundong/detail_2011_02/01/4540649_0.shtml)

Few of these are the sorts of items suitcases are designed to hold. Their odd shapes make the baggage unusually large and cumbersome -- and as such it too debars rural laborers from taking high-speed trains where regulations prescribe a luggage with a maximum weight of 20kg and no more than 130cm in width, length and height to fit the luggage racks. Having to carry these bags on the shoulder produces a characteristic stooped forwards body posture, which has come to differentiate rural migrant laborers from other passengers. The rural migrant becomes a body/woven bag assemblage (Bissel 2009, 179).

Both symbolically and materially, 'luggage emerges as an encumbrance that requires attention and resolution' (Bissel 2009, 177). The burden of carrying luggage, and the responsibility to look after it, are often poorly factored into transit designs, which encode assumptions of lightly encumbered travel. What thus becomes constituted as too much baggage can make the experience of transit 'exhausting and stressful' (Hine & Mitchell, 2001, 323). The relationship between the rural migrant and woven bag is shown in the following two poems. In the first, Wan Jianping's *My woven bag* (Xu, Luo & Chen, 2008, 203, the cumbersome bag becomes a sentimental image, a loyal travelling companion:

My woven bag

I carry a snow-white woven bag on the back

To leave my hometown and work in the city

This bulging bag

Filled with spring blessings from countryside and my dreams

In this strange city

It is my stool when I am tired

My pillow when I am sleepy

My comfort when I am sick

I carry a woven bag which is no longer white

Wading on my working journey

This bulging bag

Now has added to it so much joy, sorrow, snow, rain, wind and frost

In these drifting days

Hardships are my instant noodles when I am hungry

Grievance is my tap water when I am thirsty

Humiliation is my wine to numb my soul

A new year is coming; I carry a woven bag which is so anxious to go home

Squeezed myself into a returning train

This bulging bag

Filled with happiness without any hint of sorrow

Thinking of the surprise that my family has always been longing for

Will overflow from this woven bag

I wave to the city out of the train window

While those resentments in former days vanish from my fingers

This heavy, woven bag is integral to the whole process of its owner's migration. It is a container holding not only the owner's daily necessities, but his emotions. It becomes the migrant's constant companion (Burrell 2008, 362-363). At first it was 'snow-white', symbolising the innocent, maybe naïve, and romantic dreams about the city. The woven bag is a happy travelling companion, to be used as a stool, a pillow, and a comfort whenever the owner needed. The owner's body is extended not curtailed by this woven bag. In the city the bag becomes marked by the daily grind, and a container for grievances and sufferings. At last both owner and bag are yearning to return home. And finally they squeeze themselves on the return train. At each point, the woven bag contains different objects but it always 'bulges'.

The second poem *Flame of a drop of sweat* (from Chi Lechuan) was published in *Poetry (Shi Kan)*, one of the most famous and influential literary journals in China, indicating how the migrant literature has become an issue in mainstream literature. Compared with the previous poem, this one describes only the woven bags and their owners wending their way back home. Rural migrants and woven bags appear as an assemblage bound together by strong and intense feelings.

Going home: Warmth inside the woven bags

In the flow of people who swarm to their home
Nothing is more conspicuous than
Those big woven bags, which are
Carried high on the back or on the head, and look like
A part of those bodies.

If not carefully observing, you will neglect
Those faces beneath the bags
Crude, exhausted, anxious
But excited

You know what is inside without being told,
But do not know how much poignancy, sweat
Even tears they have paid,
In order to keep the warmth inside the woven bags
For their family

One thousand miles, ten thousand miles,
One year's ups and downs
Will be repeated in their hearts.

The woven bags are not only part of representative of the identity of these rural migrant laborers, or even travelling companions, but arguably have become part of their bodies. Bodies bearing bags that become faceless; it is not faces but bags that identify them. The narrator now appears as an observer of this assemblage of bodies and woven bags. As the migrant laborer literature has moved to the mainstream it starts to reflect how the Spring Break rush has become a spectacular phenomenon in China's railway stations.

Woven bags are still regarded as the special identity symbol of China's rural migrants, so it was hugely ironic that when Louis Vuitton released its new handbags in 2006, they looked quite similar to woven bags (Figure 1). The material culture of migrants working in globalised commodity production dramatically bumped into an international brand. Many white-collar workers who can afford luxuries and aspire to Louis Vuitton's elegance refused to purchase this 'snakeskin' handbag, for fear of contamination from the emblem of rural migrants.

These two poems provide vivid illustrations for Burrell's research on material culture in migration and the binding of ourselves to individual bags amidst 'a sea of apparently identical luggage' (2008, 363). These Chinese poems however skip over the material practices to use the material culture as a vehicle to express the emotional intensity and as a metaphorically apt vehicle carrying emotions to a final happy reunion, for which the stuff packed inside these woven bags has been so carefully kept. Bissell points out that

luggage may affect passengers' route choices, time consumption, and thus produces differently-mobile passengers (2009, 173-191). Different spaces and material culture may enable and constrain different practices and mobilities.

Flesh carriages, human parcels and the tactics of travel

Trains have been one of the classic forms of travel using body containers that immobilize and fix the bodies of travelers (Prato and Trivero 1985). Carriages are capsules that protect and shield the body from the speeds and stresses of travel. In migratory travel however the systemic violence of uneven development leading to the need to migrate comes together with experiencing the violence of speed (Martin 2011). For illegal migrants, the struggle to gain access to travel may result in defying the conventions of capsules – by stowing away on freight containers, under vehicles or the like – leading to corporeal hardship and danger (Martin 2001, 1051).

However, in the Spring break rush we see desperate attempts to incorporate as many as possible within train carriages. If the logic of capsules is that, as Ruskin opined, the railway 'transmutes a man from a traveler into a living parcel' (Schivelbusch 1986, 195) then the migrants, just like the products from the global processing factories in which they work, become parcels stacked higher and cheaper.

The following poem *Transport during the Spring Festival* is from Xi Feng Yedu, a very influential online poet. In this poem the migrants from the train

take on the condition of the factory products they produce.

.....

The train spat out a batch

Swallowed another batch

Soon it departed again

Only leaving behind piles and piles of

Overnight flesh

.....

The hierarchy of hard and soft seats and berths, implies each passenger has one seat/berth and one seat/berth has only one occupant. For hard seat carriages, however, overloading is permitted. There is a rule that for ordinary trains an additional 20% of capacity can be sold at the originating station, and then no more than 30% at following stations. But usually 50%, sometimes 100% and 200% of the capacity is exceeded (Duan, 2009, 35). Although they are 'legitimately' riding the train, the migrants might also count among Martin's (2011, 1051) 'desperate passengers' who are 'not afforded the comforts of corporeal capsularisation' and the 'cushioning of the privileged passenger that screens out the violence of speed' and instead become subject to 'a politics of discomfort.'

In the slow down/ hurry up dance of so much travel, rural migrants who queued for tickets then queue again to have their luggage security inspected, and then enter the station hall for another period of waiting; then after queuing

to have their tickets inspected (again), when their train is called they usually have to run a considerable distance to their carriages which are usually further away from their waiting areas than the soft sleeper carriages are from the VIP waiting rooms. There is always a fierce competition at the platforms in which rural migrants run with big woven bags on their shoulders, struggling against other migrants who also need space on what they all know is an overbooked train. Once aboard they must grab some space for their luggage, and if they are unfortunate enough to be one of the overbooked passengers, they also have to find standing room for their own bodies -- maybe some temporarily vacant seats whose owners may board at later stations, or standing in passageways and toilets, or precariously perched on hand basins, the backs of seats, or even the luggage rack. The sense of standing, not even sitting, in the slow, hard seat trains, is the opposite to the pleasurable lassitude promised by 'soft' sleepers (Bissell 2007, 288). Any possible space can be explored and occupied and learning the tactics of creating their own niche is part of the skill of inhabiting these spaces.

The late 90s was a second peak for 'the tide of migrant laborers'. The website Tencent recorded the physicality of the resulting overcrowding in a story from a train guard:

In Da County, Sichuan Province, people who planned to travel had to queue outside the railway station one week in advance. During this week, nobody left his site. All the activities of eating, drinking and

sleeping were confined in one square meter. Finally the train arrived.

After the door of the station was open, armed police would allow the migrants inside and stack them into carriages like they were stacking goods. After all the seats were full, 4 more people were placed on the small desk between seats, 11 or 12 people inside the toilets, at last there was no crack left for bodies movement. When I entered a carriage, a great waft of foul smelling air would rush toward me.

In order to get everyone aboard, the railway ministry employed brutal policing tactics to pile up these migrants. This was a most literal and violent sense of “throwntogetherness” (Massey, 2005) in public transit space, that forms a continuation of the densely over-crowded and underprovided urban living conditions. If as Bourdieu (1984, 466) suggested ‘one’s relationship to the social world and to one’s proper place in it is never more clearly expressed than in the space and time one feels entitled to take from others; more precisely, in the space one claims with one’s body in physical space’ then nothing expresses the social status of the floating population as clearly as these carriages.

Here once more is the recollected physicality of travel from one of the train guards:

Too many people. To conduct a ticket inspection, I took off my cotton-padded clothes leaving only my shirt on. Even so, it took me more than 20 minutes to cross the 30 meters-long carriage. Sweating

profusely, I hardly trod on the ground. I had to step on luggage and bodies, which really made me crazy.

People were stacked as packages with a suffocating stench filling the carriages. People were reduced to their physical flesh, immobilized to such an extent they might go without food or drink for up to 20 or 30 hours to reduce the need to go to the toilet. In this way the migrants are stripped of human dignity, and indeed become treated as a conjoined mass through the process of movement, the dehumanization of labor reenacted in transit.

Amidst all that throng and enforced propinquity one of the abiding affective states though is persistent anxiety. If the literature speaks of anxiety over catching the train, then for these migrants fear of crime is added to the mix. Overcrowding makes the railway station and the enclosed carriage ideal sites for theft and fraud, especially because the majority of rural migrants try to bring back as much cash as possible for their family. So besides physical strength, speed, promptness, strong will, and other tactics to cope with the overcrowded train, the emotional state of transit is one of anxious vigilance to protect their hard-earned money.

This necessity was the inspiration of a famous New Year Movie at the end of 2004, *A world without thieves*, in which the young rural migrant laborer called 'Sha Gen' (literally 'silly root'), insists it cost too much to send money home by post, and instead takes the money he has earned over several years on the long-distance train, on which there turn out to be many highly skilled thieves.

Such films only heighten the anxieties of rural migrants who develop defensive practices such as trying to stay awake all night, or travelling with close friends, or even buying 'anti-theft pants' in which to conceal money. It is not surprising then that tenseness and fatigue have been recognized as a syndrome of health issues for migrants resulting from rail travel (Lee, 1998).

Conclusion

The phenomenon of Spring Festival transport is associated with conflict and amalgamation between traditionalism and modernity in China's culture. On the one hand there is the concept of 'home', redolent with ideas of fulfillment and encouraging pilgrim-like returns; on the other hand there is the development of modern instrumental reason, sublating the concept of being attached to one's land, and pursuing profit relentlessly.

(Dong & Chen, 2008, 1)

This quote exemplifies the position of the Spring Festival as the point of contact of old and new China – a point of contact physically articulated in annual train migration. If the rise of the train in Europe meant the 'train journey and the railway station are remembered as gateways to a new life, charged with strong emotions and impressions' (Löfgren, 2008, 334) then here they are also portal back to an old life. This connection is conveyed in a poem from Zheng Jianwei, *Rural migrant laborers* (Xu, Luo & Chen, 2008, 170), which

speaks to the transitions between two lifestyles in the process of migration.

Migrant rural migrant laborers, migrant birds

Leave home in the blooming spring

Returning home in the chilly winter

Again and again, floating from one life style

To another one

Feeding their poor family and anemic children with blood and sweat

Acceptance and tolerance, refusal and discrimination

They have been used to, and responded with silence

A life known as migrant working

The poems here depict the emotional world of the migrant marked by their fear of the cities, their attachment to their hometown, their sensitivities about their social status, as expressed through the material culture and the emotions of travel. The rise of literature playing upon the migrant experience also suggests the migrant has become a figure or a trope, as much as an empirical person, through which China is representing the dislocation of old and new.

With the growth of China's economy, the volume of passengers keeps climbing annually; in 2009, there were 188 million person-trips, in 2010, 210 million person-trips and, in 2011, 230 million person-trips. The story of the

migrant workers shows a China in motion, and the popular accounts are full of liquid metaphors of floating, tides and flows. And yet that very fluid terminology is also a pejorative for people marked by their movement yet with a household registered status as a peasant tethering them to their home village. This state of betweenness leads to 'high mobility, low-level work, social network replicability and experiential isolation' (Zhu, 2003, 43-45). Migration and the materiality of hard seat carriages has left traumatic memories of overcrowding, anxiety, exhaustion, and isolation. Migration is not for these migrants a one-off journey of hope, of a better life, but part of the experience of being a 'floating population', and the experiences of these journeys can be 'be hugely powerful in that they have the potential to impress [themselves] on to other areas of life' (Bissell, 2009, 189).

The cramped dwelling in cities, the regulation and repression in work discipline seem all too readily translated into this experience of transport. And yet it is too simple to thus imply that in transport the traveller does not move but is moved (Ingold 2009, 35); the analogy of the workers being shipped like their products only gets us so far. Dwelling in transit is the making habitable and appropriation of a moving environment, just as much as any other life lived in the open (cf. Ingold 2008). The material objects, like woven bags, that are pressed into service form assemblages for dwelling. This dwelling in transit links people and objects. This form of dwelling in mobility echoes that of other migrants such as those pictured by the photographer Anne Tallentire. In her

Dimona pictures, an apparently happenstance accumulations of objects (a car bonnet, chipboard, bucket, and car parcel shelf) turn out be a sleeping shelter for an illegal migrant artfully camouflaged amid the post-industrial debris of an empty factory; it is the micro arrangements, accommodations and adaptations that show transient dwelling in transitory spaces (Crang 2012). Yet we should not romanticise these tactical appropriations either. The theft of time in queues, the poverty of possessions and the politics of discomfort in the actual travel all speak to a hierarchical striation of this mobile world. The Spring Rush exemplifies, in Bourdieu's terms, these people's lack of entitlement to take space and time. This is a population born of new found mobility on a massive scale, yet their mobility is disadvantaged, confined, and comes at high price for their dignity.

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Figure 1: LV 'snakeskin' handbags and woven bags used by rural migrants



ⁱ Online booking has been available only on high-speed trains since June, 2011)

ⁱⁱ All translations are by the authors.